

# CRYSTALLINE VISIONS, PLASTIC GESTURES

## Crystal and plastic: two Deleuzian conceptual personae

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**Abstract:** In this article I propose the hypothesis that we can expand the Deleuzian notion of conceptual persona to the domain of the inorganic. Under this light I consider crystal and plastic as two opposite, but complementary conceptual personae, fundamental to Deleuze's philosophy. In both the case of crystal and plastic, I will follow a theoretical path that bifurcates into two main directions: in my view crystal and plastic are not only meta-conceptual personae that epitomize the meaning of philosophy according to Deleuze, but also conceptual personae that convey to us an important topic for the Deleuzian thought, i.e. the individuation of materials, or how materiality matters.

**Keywords:** crystal, plastic, matter, conceptual persona, individuation.

Deleuze appears as a fine point or a crystal that is at once translucent and timeless – just like the crystal balls of clairvoyants.

Alain Badiou<sup>2</sup>

So, more than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation [...] it is a miraculous substance: a miracle is always a sudden transformation of nature. Plastic remains impregnated throughout with this wonder: it is less a thing than the trace of a movement.

Roland Barthes<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Alain BADIOU, *The Clamour of Being*, University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota/London 1999, p. 92.

<sup>3</sup> Roland BARTHES, *Mythologies*, The Noonday Press, New York 1957, p. 97.

## 1. *À la lettre*, the crystal

The crystal is an image that captures Deleuze's attention. An image, not a metaphor.<sup>4</sup> The issue of the crystal within Deleuze's thought should be understood *à la lettre*.<sup>5</sup>

“To take literally” something does not necessarily mean to preserve an idea in its original state, but also to betray and deform it – and this is paradoxical, but heuristic. The only *caveat* to inhabit the regime of literality is to avoid metaphors: the theoretical target Deleuze has in mind is the metaphor, an operation that assumes to some extent that there is an original to be transformed into a faded copy. The regime of literality quite the opposite encourages becoming and experimentation, which flow beyond the “model/copy” division. Taking something *à la lettre* means splitting an image or an idea without creating copies but proceeding from within this image or idea. Literality is a specific posture that Deleuze takes towards authors, texts, and the philosophical canon, to make it vary, again and again. Following this path, we believe that the issue of the crystal should be taken at any cost literally. At the same time the crystal exhibits the regime of literality and it is a vision (or a visualization) of literality itself. As Zourabichvili points out: «the concept of the crystal envelops a devaluation of metaphor and is inseparable from a critique and a reworking of the concept of the imaginary. Let us recall the basic schema: not a second image that would come to redouble the first, but the splitting of a single image into two parts that originally refers the one to the other». <sup>6</sup> Ultimately, for Deleuze the crystal cannot be a metaphor at all, and we should keep this in mind to follow the theoretical aim of the article.

In this contribution we will attempt to show how addressing literally the problem of the crystal in Deleuze entails at least two directions or facets, complementary but distinct. In our view the crystal is not only a *meta-conceptual persona* that epitomizes the meaning of philosophy according to Deleuze, but also a *conceptual persona* that conveys to us an important topic for the Deleuzian thought, i.e. the individuation of materials, or how materiality matters. This “theoretical play” we would like to propose is therefore an *experimentation* that moves between two paths of the *internal circuit* of

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<sup>4</sup> In the opposite direction moves the work of Haraway, who interprets crystallization as an important *metaphor* for science. See Donna HARAWAY, *Crystals, Fabrics and Fields: Metaphors that shape embryos*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1976.

<sup>5</sup> On the topic of literality inspired by the Deleuzian thought see in particular François ZOURABICHVILI, *La literalité et autres essais sur l'art*, PUF, Paris 2011, but also Daniel W. SMITH, *Sense and literality. Why there are No Metaphor in Deleuze's Philosophy?*, in D. OLKOWSKI – E. PIROVOLAKIS (eds.), *Deleuze and Guattari's Philosophy of Freedom. Freedom's Refrains*, Edinburgh University Press, New York 2019, pp. 44-67.

<sup>6</sup> François ZOURABICHVILI, *Deleuze: A Philosophy of the Event, Together with The Vocabulary of Deleuze*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2012, p. 161.

the crystal, one that enacts *virtually* a specific vision of philosophy and another that embodies *actually* a peculiar paradigm of how materiality materializes.

For Deleuze, the crystal is traversed by various circuits: there are wider or relative circuits, which are the virtual past of an actual present. What intrigues him most, however, is the internal circuit of the crystal, which connects all these virtual images with the actual ones. In other words, the internal circuit is the two-way exchange between the actual and the virtual: «vaster circuits will be able to develop, corresponding to deeper and deeper layers of reality and higher and higher levels of memory or thought. But it is this most restricted circuit of the actual image and *its* virtual image which carries everything and serves as internal limit».<sup>7</sup>

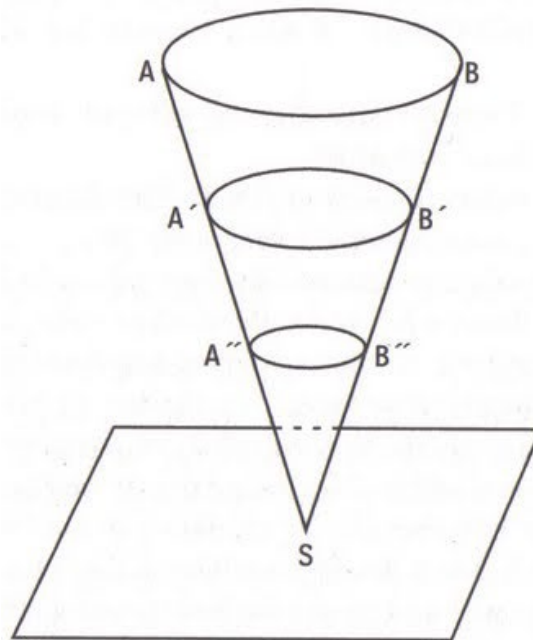


Figure 1. Visualization of the cristal-image and its circuits.

Our theoretical intent is to cross this internal circuit and interpret it in our own way as a relationship between a specific view of philosophy (virtuality) and materiality (actuality), showing their mutual exchange. First of all, the crystal is literally a condensed visualization<sup>8</sup> of Deleuze's transcendental empiricism and of his philosophy of immanence. At the same time Deleuze's thought represents for all intents and purposes the facets of a crystal, a coalescence between consistence and disparity,

<sup>7</sup> Gilles DELEUZE, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1989, p. 69.

<sup>8</sup> Figure 1: Deleuze borrows this scheme from Bergson's cone of Matter and Memory. See DELEUZE, *Cinema 2*, p. 289. This scheme illustrates the operativity of the circuits. It is also famously related to the issue of temporality, but we will set aside this topic for reasons of space. See Henri BERGSON, *Matter and memory*, Macmillan, London 1911, p. 128.

univocity and multiplicity. Secondly, taking the problem of the crystal literally implies mapping the image of physical individuation and bringing the problem of materials to the table. If our reality make sign for a *new materialism*, the image of the crystal is a paradigmatic conceptual persona of how this individuation materializes and matters.

Following this guideline, it is interesting to try to reassemble the genesis of the concept of the crystal in order to highlight what crystals can tell us, literally, about the Deleuzian thought.

To do so we will attempt to show how the crystal is a *conceptual persona*<sup>9</sup> “in flesh and blood” (and again, not a metaphor) for Deleuze, proposing a paradoxical, but for this reason heuristic, juxtaposition, in the Deleuzian sense of the term, between a conceptual persona and an inorganic material. Indeed, we believe that Deleuze would not be scandalized if we extended the notion of conceptual persona to the inorganic world, precisely because conceptual characters express a pre-personal force.

Who are conceptual characters is perhaps a misplaced question. Rather, the question is: what do conceptual characters *do*? They intercede in thought on the behalf of the philosopher. Conceptual personae for Deleuze are not only persons, but first and foremost events and *intercessions* that force us to think and direct us in thinking, acting as medium of problems. A conceptual persona is what *stands for* a philosopher, what continues to intercede for him: «conceptual personae carry out the movements that describe the author’s plane of immanence, and they play a part in the very creation of the author’s concepts».<sup>10</sup> According to Deleuze to do philosophy we need to disengage from our own selves and rely on some conceptual characters to proceed in our place and instead of us in thought. For Deleuze it is precisely when the self fades that life – *a life* –<sup>11</sup> is invigorated.

Conceptual personae are heteronyms of the philosopher, and there would be nothing more Deleuzian than to entrust and *delegate*<sup>12</sup> parts of one’s philosophy to a

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<sup>9</sup> We can find the main formulation of the notion of conceptual persona in the third chapter of *What is Philosophy?*, although the author uses the dispositive of the conceptual persona extensively through his production. For more on the subject see Gregg LAMBERT, *Who are Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘Conceptual Personae’?*, in D. OLKOWSKI – E. PIROVOLAKIS (eds.), *Deleuze and Guattari’s Philosophy of Freedom: Freedom’s Refrains*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2019, pp. 15-46, but also Mathias SCHÖNHER, *Deleuze and Guattari’s Conceptual Persona Revisited: The List of Character Traits as a Table of Categories*, “Cosmos and History”, 17, 3, 2021, pp. 309-339.

<sup>10</sup> Gilles DELEUZE – Félix GUATTARI, *What is philosophy?*, Columbia University Press, New York 1994, p. 63.

<sup>11</sup> Gilles DELEUZE, *Immanence: A Life...*, in A. BOYMAN (ed.), *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*, Zone Books, New York 2001, pp. 25-34.

<sup>12</sup> We use this word in Latour’s sense. The reticular idea of relations that Actor Network-Theory (ANT) implies is the following: reality is constituted by continuous transformations and displacements,

vibrant matter – otherness par excellence – that embodies its meaning. Following Deleuze:

the conceptual persona is not the philosopher's representative but, rather, the reverse: the philosopher is only the envelope of his principal conceptual persona and of all the other personae who are the intercessors [*intercesseurs*], the real subjects of his philosophy. Conceptual personae are the philosopher's "heteronyms", and the philosopher's name is the simple pseudonym of his personae. I am no longer myself but thought's aptitude for finding itself and spreading across a plane that passes through me at several places. The philosopher is the idiosyncrasy of his conceptual personae. The destiny of the philosopher is to become his conceptual persona or personae.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. Crystal clear, crystal (un)clear: a crystalline "vision" for philosophy

The crystal is a magnetic material for philosophy,<sup>14</sup> a "conceptual image" that condensates a specific philosophical *vision*: from Plato to Schopenhauer and Kant, crystals represent symmetry, harmony and beauty. The Platonic solids described in the *Timaeus*,<sup>15</sup> which have a crystalline structure, are paradigmatic examples of proportion and order. Similarly, for Kant crystals exhibit a very clear aesthetic finality.<sup>16</sup> Crystals inspire complacency and elicit the free play of our faculties in accordance with nature. Likewise for Schopenhauer<sup>17</sup> they are inorganic materials that have a tendency toward organization.

For Deleuze such an image of the crystal could never embody his philosophical vision. He would surely break down and *crack*<sup>18</sup> this "crystal clear" and well-balanced

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shared by human and non-human entities. See for instance Bruno LATOUR, *Reassembling the social. An introduction to actor-network theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005.

<sup>13</sup> DELEUZE – GUATTARI, *What is philosophy?*, p. 64.

<sup>14</sup> For a reconstruction of the importance of crystals in philosophy see Mark A. CHEETHAM, *The Crystal Interface in Contemporary Art: Metaphors of the Organic and Inorganic*, "Leonardo", 43, 3, 2010, pp. 251-255.

<sup>15</sup> PLATO, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 9, Harvard University Press, London 1925, 30a and 33b; see also Chiara ELMi – Dani L. GOODMAN, *Beauty of Order and Symmetry in Minerals: Bridging Ancient Greek Philosophy with Modern Science*, "Found Sci", 18, 2, 2023, pp. 1-25 and David R. LLOYD, *Symmetry and beauty in Plato*, "Symmetry", 2, 2, 2010, pp. 455-465.

<sup>16</sup> See for instance Immanuel KANT, *Critique of Judgement*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009, p. 176 and p. 328. On the topic of crystals in Kant and their relation with teleology see also Piero GIORDANETTI, *L'avventura della ragione. Kant e il giovane Nietzsche*, Georg Olms Verlag Hildesheim, Zurich-New York 2011, pp. 91-94.

<sup>17</sup> Arthur SCHOPENHAUER, *The World As Will And Representation*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2018, p. 309.

<sup>18</sup> On the question of cracking the crystal see Barry NEVIN, *Cracking Gilles Deleuze's Crystal*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2018.

image of thought, as thought is shot through with shocks, problems and disparities. To do philosophy means to inhabit the threshold of the problematic, to inhabit paradoxes and impossible coexistences. Philosophy is first and foremost an *aberration*<sup>19</sup> than a form of harmony:<sup>20</sup> or rather, nothing can be crystal clear unless there is a “crystal unclear” face that counteracts and counter-effectuate it. The peculiarity of Deleuze’s philosophy is that it can always remain in contact with his conceptual stand-ins and doubles, other faces of the crystal: so the non-sense is always lurking in the sense, the actual in the virtual, the *doxa* in the non-dogmatic image of thought, the non-philosophical in the philosophical, the inside in the outside, the light in the shadow, the impersonal life in the subject and...and...and. Deleuze’s philosophy is a constant paradoxical exercise of wavering.<sup>21</sup> One cannot dwell on one face of the crystal as he is immediately thrust in chasing its counterpart. As Deleuze points out:

the crystal-image, or crystalline description, has two definite sides which are not to be confused. But indiscernibility constitutes an objective illusion; it does not suppress the distinction between the two sides, but makes it unattributable, each side taking the other’s role in a relation which we must describe as reciprocal presupposition, or reversibility. In fact, there is no virtual which does not become actual in relation to the actual, the latter becoming virtual through the same relation: it is a place and its obverse which are totally reversible. These are ‘mutual images’ as Bachelard puts it, where an exchange is carried out.<sup>22</sup>

Beyond any dualism, the faces of the crystal are distinct but indiscernible. In order to get rid of the negative in a Hegelian sense<sup>23</sup> Deleuze needs a new conceptual character, one that makes the opposite an ever-approaching intensive threshold, and the crystal perfectly represents this ambiguous and amphibious status: the opposite is

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<sup>19</sup> On the topic see in particular Gilles DELEUZE, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, London, Verso 1998. See also David LAPOUJADE, *Aberrant Movements. The Philosophy of Gilles Deleuze*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Deleuze cracks the notion of harmony especially in his work on Kant; see Gilles DELEUZE, *Kant’s Critical Philosophy. The Doctrine of the Faculties*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1985.

<sup>21</sup> As Kozin points out: «the choice of the name for the concept can be explained through the physical properties of mineral morphology: the structure of a crystal allows us to see how, with each turn of the crystal, what is opaque and virtual becomes luminous and actual. This reversibility makes all sorts of binaries coalesce, taking us beyond anthropological structuralism with its staple distinctions: ‘hard’ and ‘soft’, ‘saying’ and ‘said’, ‘past’ and ‘future’, ‘here’ and ‘there’. Our thoughts become matter, while matter becomes an object of our thoughts» (Alexander KOZIN, *The appearing memory: Gilles Deleuze and Andrey Tarkovsky on ‘crystal-image’*, “Memory Studies”, 2, 2009, pp. 103-117).

<sup>22</sup> DELEUZE, *Cinema 2*, p. 69.

<sup>23</sup> For Deleuze’s critique of the negative see in particular Gilles DELEUZE, *Difference and Repetition*, Continuum, London 1994.

not external but is generated right from within, and it is only an inflection not a sharp cut. Deleuze never rejects otherness, in whatever form it is expressed; he does not deny and ostracize it, but places it on an indiscernible yet communicating plane (another face of the crystal), which at any moment can shift. There is no original because the original can always *morph* into its copy, and the copy is precisely the original, seen from another perspective. The crystal is a *simulacrum*<sup>24</sup> of the Deleuzian philosophy – or maybe, even better, Deleuze’s philosophy is a *simulacrum* of a crystalline regime. The crystal depicts Deleuze’s philosophy in action, and it is therefore in this sense that we would like to define it as a meta-conceptual persona, because it allows all the concepts that Deleuze brings to life in his philosophical work to be seen *in nuce*. The crystal is not only a conceptual character, but it is first and foremost a meta-conceptual character that expresses the Deleuzian vision of philosophy, according to which: «paradox is the affirmation of both senses or directions at the same time».<sup>25</sup> All Deleuzian concepts have a turnaround danger, and this is precisely their power. The other side of the coin is always the risk to be taken to *do* philosophy:

what are the characteristics of this paradoxical entity? It circulates without end in both series and, for this reason, assures their communication. It is a two-sided entity, equally present in the signifying and the signified series. It is the mirror. Thus, it is at once word and thing, name and object, sense and denotatum, expression and designation, etc. It guarantees, therefore, the convergence of the two series which it traverses, but precisely on the condition that it makes them endlessly diverge. It has the property of being always displaced in relation to itself [...] We must say that the paradoxical entity is never where we look for it, and conversely that we never find it where it is. As Lacan says, it fails to observe its place (*elle manque a sa place*). It also fails to observe its own identity, resemblance, equilibrium, and origin. We will not say, therefore, of the two series it animates, that the one is originary and the other derived, though they certainly may be originary or derived in relation to one another. They can also be successive in relation to one another. But they are strictly simultaneous in relation to the entity by means of which they communicate. They are simultaneous without ever being equal, since the entity has two sides, one of which is always absent from the other.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> For further insights on the problem of the simulacrum in Deleuze see for instance Daniel W. SMITH, *The Concept of the Simulacrum: Deleuze and the Overturning of Platonism*, “Continental Philosophy Review”, 38, 2, 2005, pp. 89-123.

<sup>25</sup> Gilles DELEUZE, *Logic of Sense*, Columbia University Press, New York 1990, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Ivi*, p. 43.

For Deleuze, the crystal pushes diffraction and image multiplicity even beyond a scene of two juxtaposed mirrors,<sup>27</sup> to the extent that the one face of the crystal is an “intensive mirror” of its double, and vice versa. If there is mirroring between the actual and the virtual<sup>28</sup> it occurs *from within* the *crystal-image* that is at the same time actual and virtual:

what we see in the crystal is therefore a dividing in two that the crystal itself constantly causes to turn on itself, that it prevents from reaching completion, because it is a perpetual self-distinguishing, a distinction in the process of being produced; which always resumes the distinct terms in itself, in order constantly to relaunch them. ‘The putting into abyss [*mise-en-abyme*] does not redouble the unit, as an external reflection might do; in so far as it is an internal mirroring, it can only ever split it in two’, and subject it ‘to the infinite relaunch of endlessly new splitting’. The crystal-image is, then, the point of indiscernibility of the two distinct images.<sup>29</sup>

Philosophy, likewise, continually confronts its internal doubles; philosophy must always stand before the mirror of the unthought, which is always internal to philosophy itself. The many faces of the “*crystal-Deleuze*” show splittings, compositions and coalescence. Ultimately, the crystal is a vision<sup>30</sup> of Deleuze’s philosophy. The “*crystal-Deleuze*”, or Deleuze’s thought is both bright and dark. Quoting Deleuze:

the organization of the crystal is bipolar, or rather two-sided. In surrounding the seed, it sometimes passes on an acceleration, a hurrying, sometimes a hopping or fragmenting, which will constitute the opaque side of the crystal; and sometimes it gives it a limpidity which is like the test of the eternal. On one side would be written ‘Saved!’, and on the other ‘Doomed!’<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Deleuze tackles the problem of juxtaposed mirrors to approach the issue of the crystal-image: juxtaposed mirrors are in his view a first form of proliferation of multiplicities, but this process must be amplified if the mirroring becomes – to an extent again paradoxical – intensive, and not just external. See DELEUZE, *Cinema 2*, p. 70.

<sup>28</sup> This reasoning applies to every pair of Deleuzian concepts, as we have already mentioned: sense and nonsense, philosophy and non-philosophy, light and shadow etc.

<sup>29</sup> DELEUZE, *Cinema 2*, pp. 80-81.

<sup>30</sup> Even more precisely, one should speak of clairvoyance rather than vision, since vision presupposes that the object is immediately available, whereas in clairvoyance what counts is the chasing of the object, of which one catches only traces, signs and adumbrations, as in the crystal. On the topic see DELEUZE, *Cinema 2*, p. 176 and p. 260 and see Julia PONZO, *Visione e veggenza in Derrida e Deleuze, la raffigurazione in atto*, “E/C”, 15, 30, 2020, pp. 81-87.

<sup>31</sup> DELEUZE, *Cinema 2*, p. 91.



The alternative between a “Bright Deleuze”<sup>32</sup> and a “Dark Deleuze”<sup>33</sup> does not work, because Deleuze’s philosophy will always be a crystal in which these two faces coexist in a regime of coalescence: «between the two distinct sides of the crystal, a doubt will always remain, preventing us from knowing which is limpid and which is dark, considering the conditions».<sup>34</sup> Philosophy is an exercise that must be practiced *on the edge* of different facets. As Deleuze points out: «events are like crystals, they become and grow only out of the edges, or on the edge».<sup>35</sup>

### 3. How crystal matters? Simondon, the ghost in the crystal

The crystal is not only a meta-conceptual character that expresses the “virtual vision” of Deleuze’s philosophy, but also an actual conceptual character that expresses his view on materiality and the process of its *individuation*. The crystal represents first and foremost the power of non-organic life.<sup>36</sup>

As is often the case in Deleuzian production, Deleuze makes “conceptual thefts” and deformations of concepts from other philosophies. It is a specific hermeneutic posture according to which concepts must be surfed as a “piratical adventure”.<sup>37</sup> In this conceptual game all means are allowed. It is not plagiarism, but regeneration and resemantisation of concepts, to put them back into orbit. The crystal-image indeed is also plundered by other thinkers and does not escape this logic. Interestingly, Deleuze quickly quotes Bachelard in a footnote,<sup>38</sup> but does not explicitly mention Simondon in his chapter of *Cinema 2* on crystals. Both Bachelard and Simondon deal extensively with the issue of crystals, but Simondon certainly represents the privileged observation point from which Deleuze looks at the problem. Deleuze let his thought slide and flow through Simondon’s, creating a zone of indiscernibility. Simondon emerges between the lines of the chapter on crystals.

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<sup>32</sup> See for instance Hanjo BERRESSEM, *Gilles Deleuze’s luminous philosophy*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2020 or Christian FRIGERIO, *Filosofia-luce. Deleuze nella caverna di Platone*, “Il pensare”, 9, 10, 2020, pp. 56-74.

<sup>33</sup> Andrew CULP, *Dark Deleuze*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2016.

<sup>34</sup> DELEUZE, *Cinema 2*, p. 70.

<sup>35</sup> DELEUZE, *Logic of Sense*, p. 9.

<sup>36</sup> DELEUZE, *Cinema 2*, p. 81.

<sup>37</sup> See Alain BADIOU, *The Adventure of French Philosophy*, Verso Books, London 2010, p. LXIII.

<sup>38</sup> DELEUZE, *Cinema 2*, p. 292. Bachelard deals with the subject of crystals as a material of rêverie. See G. BACHELARD, *Earth and of rêveries of will*, The Dallas Institutes Publication, Dallas 2002, pp. 222-250.

The issues that are inspired by Simondon are the following: *physical individuation*, the relationship between genesis and structure, the formation and growth of materials,<sup>39</sup> the relationship between seed and *milieu*,<sup>40</sup> the process of materials' self-distinguishing.<sup>41</sup>

In Deleuze all these themes remain drafted in the chapter on crystals. In order to better understand the vision that the crystal embodies as a material for Deleuze we must then turn to Simondon.<sup>42</sup> Deleuze assumes this vision and makes it his own but does not go into much detail to explain it. Simondon is a ghost that haunts the pages dedicated to the topic of the crystal. Therefore, we must follow its *traces* in order to reconstruct the conceptual image of the crystal as an exemplar paradigm of physical individuation, i.e. of how materials matter. As Simondon points out: «a crystal, – which, starting from a very small seed, extends in all directions in its oversaturated aquamarine –, it is the most elementary image of the transductive operation: each molecular layer already formed is the basis for the structuring of the layer that is being formed; the result is an amplifying structure».<sup>43</sup>

For Simondon, the pre-individual being is stretched into a state of *metastability*. By a metastable system Simondon means a system that is neither stable nor unstable, a becoming in the middle between staticity and absolute disequilibrium, an energetic state of equilibrium that is preserved as long as it is not supplied with a quantity of forces that disrupts its homeostasis. Simondon calls this energy that disrupts being an “objectively problematic state”. He also uses the word oversaturation as a synonym for metastability. For the French author physical individuation is a resolution of a metastable tension that arises within the pre-individual being. As Piatti states: «once a

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<sup>39</sup> As Deleuze points out: «the crystal caught in its formation and growth, related to the ‘seeds’ which make it up. In fact there is never a completed crystal; each crystal is infinite by right, in the process of being made, and is made with a seed which incorporates the environment and forces it to crystallize» (DELEUZE, *Cinema 2*, p. 88).

<sup>40</sup> To quote Deleuze: «In fact, the seed is on the one hand the virtual image which will crystallize an environment which is at present [*actuellement*] amorphous; but on the other hand the latter must have a structure which is virtually crystallizable, in relation to which the seed now plays the role of actual image» (*Ivi*, p. 74).

<sup>41</sup> As Deleuze writes: «What we see in the crystal is therefore a dividing in two that the crystal itself constantly causes to turn on itself, that it prevents from reaching completion, because it is a perpetual self-distinguishing, a distinction in the process of being produced» (*Ivi*, p. 80).

<sup>42</sup> On the relation between Deleuze and Simondon on the topic of crystals see in particular Giulio PIATTI, *The life and the crystal. Path of into the virtual in Bergson, Simondon and Deleuze*, “LaDeleuziana”, 3, 2016, pp. 51-58. See also Anne SAUVAGNARGUES (ed.), *Artmachines. Deleuze, Guattari, Simondon*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2016.

<sup>43</sup> Gilbert SIMONDON, *L'individuation psychique et collective. À la lumière des notions de Forme, Information, Potentiel et Métastabilité*, Aubier, Paris 1989, p. 39, my translation.

seed crystal is implanted in an amorphous substance in metastable state, it triggers a process of individuation where the crystal individuates itself as an energetic system through a continuous amplification». <sup>44</sup> This amplification phenomenon is defined as “transduction”, or individuation. The general formula of individuation is transductive structuration. It is produced through the precipitation of a metastable equilibrium that, disturbed by an objectively problematic state, enters in a state of resolution. In crystallization the transductive operation is the propagation of a seed that gradually structures a *milieu*. For the French philosopher, individuation always starts from a state of *energetic disparity* that triggers a structuring process: it is only in the asymmetry and differential gap that individuation is produced. As Simondon states: «the seed is the emitter, the field is the receptor, the boundary between emitter and receptor shifts continuously as the shaping operation is progressively carried out; one could say that the boundary between the structural seed and the structural metastable field is a *modulator*». <sup>45</sup> For Simondon the Aristotelian hylomorphic model does not live up to the notion of individuation, as the latter cannot be strictly defined as the combination of two distinct entities, matter and form. Instead, it should be seen as an infinite energetic process, given that the crystal is inherently incomplete: <sup>46</sup> «a crystal is endowed with an indefinite power of growth; a crystal can have its growth stopped, but never completed, and it can always continue to grow if we put it back into a metastable medium that it can structure». <sup>47</sup> Although the crystal, once structured, is to a certain extent “exhausted”, <sup>48</sup> this does not exclude a constitutive and open relationality with its *milieu*. Following Simondon: «the physical individual, always off-center, always peripheral to itself, is active at the edge of his own sphere». <sup>49</sup> Physical individuation has a double, amphibious life: it is simultaneously relational and exhausted. That is, an energetic stability is achieved from a certain point of view, although the physical individual remains open and connective. Physical individuation is always a “*dynamic limit*”: the individuation of materials materializes in a *plastic* and relational way, in constant relationship with the *milieu* within which it emerges. Materiality is not substantial, but relational.

As Deleuze reminds us:

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<sup>44</sup> *Ivi*, p. 54.

<sup>45</sup> SIMONDON, *L'individuation psychique et collective*, p. 59, my translation.

<sup>46</sup> See again PIATTI, *The life and the crystal*, p. 54.

<sup>47</sup> SIMONDON, *L'individuation psychique et collective. À la lumière des notions de Forme, Information, Potentiel et Métastabilité*, pp. 86-87, my translation.

<sup>48</sup> Insofar as crystallization resolves a tensive state abruptly.

<sup>49</sup> SIMONDON, *L'individuation psychique et collective*, p. 85, my translation.

in the first place, singularities-events correspond to heterogeneous series which are organized into a system which is neither stable nor unstable, but rather “metastable”, endowed with a potential energy wherein the differences between series are distributed. Potential energy is the energy of the pure event, whereas forms of actualization correspond to the realization of the event. In the second place, singularities possess a process of auto-unification, always mobile and displaced to the extent that a paradoxical element traverses the series and makes them resonate, enveloping the corresponding singular points in a single aleatory point and all the emissions, all dice throws, in a single cast. In the third place, singularities or potentials haunt the surface. Everything happens at the surface in a crystal which develops only on the edges. Undoubtedly, an organism is not developed in the same manner.<sup>50</sup>

Physical individuation is different from organic individuation, but this does not detract from the fact that both processes share a relational basis, due to the connection they have with pre-individuality. In other words, going back to a Deleuzian vocabulary, (actual) individuation processes, – whatever they may be –, are rooted in the *groundless ground* of the virtual, which is a pure relational and metastable power.

#### 4. The mattering of matter, the mattering of thought

To attach the label of materialist to Deleuze *tout court* would be incorrect. If Deleuze can be said to be a materialist, it is with appropriate *caveats*. Throughout his works, indeed, he proposes to cross any form of dualism. As Schleusener states: «Deleuze rather seems to have understood his own philosophy as an alternative to an overly narrow distinction between “idealism” on the one hand, and “materialism” or “realism” on the other. This is not to say, however, that the question of materialism is entirely insignificant in his work».<sup>51</sup> Matter in Deleuze is fluid and dynamic, not a passive and inert receptacle. And, another clarification, matter is not opposed to spirit or thought. More specifically, the mattering of materiality is an active and productive *dimension* that participates in the becoming of reality. Gilles Deleuze’s *theory of the event*, which occupies a distinctive space between the ideal and the material, offers a profound challenge to traditional theories that tend to prioritize either cognitive processes (ideal) or the physicality of bodies and objects (material). In Deleuze’s view, events are not simply reducible to mental constructs or purely physical occurrences; instead, they exist in a realm that encompasses both but is reducible to neither.

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<sup>50</sup> DELEUZE, *Logic of Sense*, p. 103.

<sup>51</sup> Simon SCHLEUSENER, *A Politics of Things? Deleuze and New Materialism*, “Deleuze and Guattari Studies”, 15, 4, 2021, p. 533.

It is no coincidence that Deleuze's thought has inspired the so-called new materialism.<sup>52</sup> New materialism represents a set of contemporary philosophical approaches that call into question the traditional dualism between matter and spirit, seeking to understand matter as something active, vital, and dynamic. It is an umbrella term belonging to feminist-driven posthumanist philosophies. Central to the agenda of new materialisms is a resemantization, in an anti-dualist key, of the concept of materiality. For new materialism is *the flow of a life* that materializes into matter and thought, and this flow is pre-personal and pre-individual. New materialisms combine a radical critique of anthropocentrism with a new view of materiality, understood as a flow of experience. These philosophies are concerned with accounting for the mattering of matter and thought, which are intertwined in the reality of experience.

Coming back to Deleuze: a philosophical vision, – something conceptual to the highest degree – materializes precisely in the crystal. The virtuality of Deleuzian philosophy is actualized in the crystal: there is no thought without matter, and there is no matter without thought. They are two distinct elements but indiscernible facets of the same reality:

the plane of immanence has two facets as Thought and as Nature, as Nous and as Physis. That is why there are always many infinite movements caught within each other, each folded in the others, so that the return of one instantaneously relaunches another in such a way that the plane of immanence is ceaselessly being woven, like a gigantic shuttle.<sup>53</sup>

Philosophy as creation of concepts cannot but confront a *sentendum* that pushes and forces thought to think. Ultimately, the image of thought is the matter of life, and *vice versa*. And it is precisely the crystal's inner circuit that allows this transit, between the actual and *its* virtual image.

One cannot consider matter as abstracted from ideas and from the affects within which it emerges. This also apply in reverse. The crystal embodies such interrelations: a conceptual vision for philosophy, affectively welded to a material.

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<sup>52</sup> The two forerunners of the new materialisms are Braidotti and DeLanda. See Rosi BRAIDOTTI, *The Posthuman*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2013 and Manuel DELANDA, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*, Continuum, London 2006. Other important works in the field are Karen BARAD, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Duke University Press, Durham 2007; Jane BENNET, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Thing*, Duke University Press, Durham 2010; Diana COOLE – Samantha FROST (eds.), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Duke University Press, Durham 2010; Rick DOLPHIJN – Iris VAN DER TUIN (eds.), *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*, Open Humanities Press, Ann Arbor 2012.

<sup>53</sup> DELEUZE – GUATTARI, *What is philosophy?*, p. 35.

As Deleuze suggests, the structure of the crystal has an *aesthetic*<sup>54</sup> dimension. The materiality of the crystal subtends a new logic of sensation,<sup>55</sup> which philosophy must interface with. From Greek αἴσθησις, means exactly sensation. Deleuze's reversal of Platonism also takes place through such an inversion: ideas have a material, sensible and tangible cause. So, philosophy is propelled as much by thought as by its unthought, which is feeling, sensation, αἴσθησις. Thought is shaken from *Outside*.

Again, the feeling is not necessarily human, but it is first and foremost a pre-individual and immanent affect. Materiality and aesthetics are intimately connected, and in turn are intimately connected to concepts. The life of concepts<sup>56</sup> is crystalized in the materiality of being.

### 5. Plastifying Deleuze. A *counter-effectuation* of the crystal

In both the virtual and actual sides of the crystal's inner circuit, it seems something is missing. The crystal as a meta-conceptual and material vision seems to lack something.

We believe that the crystal as a conceptual character needs a counterpart, a necessary enemy, or perhaps even better, a friendly<sup>57</sup> antagonist: if crystal is a "material concept", plastic is a "conceptual matter". Deleuze never wrote anything about plastic, but we will show in what sense plastic can be a Deleuzian conceptual character, which goes hand in hand with the crystal, as much in terms of what it means to do philosophy as in terms of how the individuation of materials works. Plastic is in a way a *fictional conceptual character*, because Deleuze has never dealt with it. At the same time, however, it embodies a series of fundamental *gestures* to the Deleuzian philosophy. Both crystal and plastic *express*<sup>58</sup> the Deleuzian philosophy, and they are two different

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<sup>54</sup> Deleuze states: «What are these consolidates of actual and virtual which define a crystalline structure (in a general, aesthetic, rather than a scientific, sense)?» (DELEUZE, *Cinema 2*, p. 69).

<sup>55</sup> See Gilles DELEUZE, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2023. See also Dorothea OLKOWSKI, *Deleuze's aesthetics of sensation*, in D.W. SMITH – H. SOMERS-HALL (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Deleuze*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012, pp. 265-285.

<sup>56</sup> On the topic see in particular Paolo VIGNOLA – Filippo DOMENICALI, *Deleuze. Filosofia di una vita*, Carocci, Roma 2023.

<sup>57</sup> On the topic see in particular DELEUZE – GUATTARI, *What is philosophy?*, pp. 3-7. See also Charles J. STIVALE, *Gilles Deleuze's ABCs: the folds of friendship*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2008; Hélio Rebello CARDOSO JR., *Friendship as conceptual landscape and friend as conceptual character, according to Deleuze e Guattari*, "Kriterion", 2007, pp. 33-45.

<sup>58</sup> On the topic see Gilles DELEUZE, *Expressionism in Philosophy. Spinoza*, Zone Books, New York 1992.

*modes* of looking at the same problem, i.e. the relation between the image of thought and the matter of reality.

Like the crystal, plastic has attracted the imaginary of many philosophers. For instance, according to Roland Barthes, plastic is the miracle of modernity, an alchemic material, «sublimated as movement, that hardly exists as substance».<sup>59</sup> According to him plastic rather than circumscribing essences, traces a perpetual movement: «hence a perpetual amazement, the reverie of man at the sight of the proliferating forms of matter, and the connections he detects between the singular of the origin and the plural of the effects».<sup>60</sup> According to Jane Bennett, plastic is a material with a specific and own *agency*.<sup>61</sup> For Timothy Morton it is a hyperobject,<sup>62</sup> that is a complex object intertwined with the ecological crisis. Plastic evokes various scenarios and suggestions of thought.

But why plastic can be considered a Deleuzian conceptual character? We will argue that plastic can be a Deleuzian conceptual character by virtue of its connection with the following topic: the fold, elasticity, deformation, becoming, *potentia agendi*, formlessness, movement, capitalism and paradoxality.

First of all, plastic as a material has a number of characteristics that are opposite to those of the crystal, but which perfectly embody as well Deleuze's conceptual vision. Again, this might sound paradoxical, but as we have already said it is precisely paradox as a "*principle of explosion*" that replaces the principle of non-contradiction in Deleuze's philosophy. Plastic indeed is not solid, but elastic and quite easily deformable. It spontaneously makes sign for the image of the fold. The "plastic-image" is a Baroque one. Indeed, it is no coincidence that Deleuze speaks of plastic forces in reference to Leibniz.<sup>63</sup> For Deleuze, there are no punctual points, but only inflection

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<sup>59</sup> BARTHES, *Mythologies*, p. 98.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> BENNETT, *Vibrant Matter*, pp. 6-48.

<sup>62</sup> The hyperobjects of catastrophe – such as global warming, plastic, and radioactive plutonium – make it clear that we need to reconsider our understanding of objectuality. It is no longer possible to maintain a strict separation between subject and object, or between human and non-human: non-human entities are not merely passive elements but are part of a complex network of relations. The world of objects is not simply external to us but also influences us from within (consider the microbiome, microplastics, or technological devices). We are entangled in the stickiness of hyperobjects, a consequence of living in the Anthropocene: all entities in the world are interconnected, making it impossible to sharply divide the human from the non-human. See Timothy MORTON, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2013.

<sup>63</sup> See in particular Gilles DELEUZE, *The Fold. Leibniz and the Baroque*, The Athlone Press, London 1993, p. 3, p. 9, p. 11, p. 101, p. 111, p. 116, p. 117.

and folds, which have exactly the characteristic of plasticity. Inflection «is neither an atom nor a Cartesian point, but an elastic or plastic point-fold».<sup>64</sup>

Moreover, for Deleuze, deformation is a fundamental idea: in particular, homeomorphism<sup>65</sup> is a function of topological space that produces deformation without tearing. According to this principle, form does not imprint on a matter, but rather produces a “form-taking” or a mattering (individuation).

If with the conceptual image of the crystal Deleuze “wrestles with” hylomorphism, plastic can radicalize this process, and extra steps would be taken towards deconstructing the Aristotelian model.

In other words, there is a plasticity and an energetic force that characterizes the individuation of materials (and of philosophy, at the same time). Plastic is pure transformation, pure becoming and as a material exhibits – in another sense than the crystal but in a complementary way – how materials matter and materialize.

In addition to that plastic can be seen as an image of the *potential agendi*. Deleuze borrows the concept of *potentia* from Spinoza<sup>66</sup> but makes free and partly idiosyncratic use of it. To assume the concept of limit as synonymous for a circumscribing perimeter, delimiting a form,<sup>67</sup> is, according to Deleuze, unproductive. Instead, entities should be defined by their *potentia*, i.e. by what they can do and are capable of doing. Deleuze rejects the idea that there is an essence that encloses and defines entities once and for all. Plastic is the conceptual character of this shift, since it is a material in motion, elastic and open to reconfigurations. Plastic, rather than having an essence – as Barthes reminds us –, is formless, and formlessness<sup>68</sup> is another important concept for Deleuze. Coming back to the image of the fold: «the Baroque refers not to an essence but rather to an operative function, a trait. It endlessly produces folds».<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> *Ivi*, p. 3.

<sup>65</sup> On the importance of the concept of homeomorphism as a topological figure of tear-free deformation in Deleuzian philosophy, see DELEUZE, *Logic of Sense*, p. 25. See also Daniel G. COCKAYNE – Derek RUEZ – Anna J. SECOR, *Thinking space differently: Deleuze’s Möbius topology for a theorisation of the encounter*, “Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers”, 45, 2019, pp. 1-14; Jesper HOFFMEYER, *Surfaces inside surfaces: On the origin of agency and life*, “Cybernetics & Human Knowing”, 5, 1, 1998, pp. 33-42.

<sup>66</sup> In particular see Gilles DELEUZE, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, City Lights Books, San Francisco 1998.

<sup>67</sup> On the issue of *form* vs *potentia* see Rossella FABBRICHESI, *Form vs Power. Pragmatism and the Wave of Spinozism*, “Cognitio”, 20, 1, 2019, pp. 48-61.

<sup>68</sup> Deleuze develops this concept in *Difference and Repetition*, where he associates it with the pre-individual, showing how the field of immanence is stretched into such a state of formlessness, from which individuation emerges. See DELEUZE, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 91, p. 115, p. 299.

<sup>69</sup> DELEUZE, *The Fold*, p. 3.



Plastic is also the very material<sup>70</sup> of capitalism and of its schizophrenia.<sup>71</sup> It has enabled the mass production of low-cost goods, making them accessible to a wide range of people. This capacity for large-scale production is a fundamental characteristic of capitalism, which seeks to reduce costs and maximize profits through industrialization and the commodification of products. Being economical and versatile, plastic has facilitated the spread of disposable products, fueling a continuous cycle of consumption and production that underpins capitalist economies. Plastic elicits the production circle of “the consumer society”<sup>72</sup> and the productivity of desire. Deleuze needs a conceptual character that embodies the contradictions of our contemporary world, and plastic is definitely a good candidate for this role. According to Deleuze, indeed, philosophy cannot disengage from the present in which it swims. If the crystal refers to a time that is pure pulsation of the virtual, plastic is the image of our actual time.

Plastic indeed perfectly represents the ambiguities and paradoxes of our historical *milieu*: it is something that we cannot absorb but neither we can expel, whose expression is in a state of suspension. Its elastic dimension is associated, on the contrary and at the same time, with refractoriness to disposal, an enduring residuality.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, plastic is a matter of fact but also a matter of concern, it is a miraculous and alchemical material, but also a public enemy. Not only: plastic is pervasively visible, but also difficult to detect and, in a way, invisible.<sup>74</sup> Plastic is and has been very useful, but toxic.<sup>75</sup> Plastic it is a paradoxical material even culturally. The deformation of sense into non-sense is a crucial point for Deleuze, from a theoretical point of view, and plastic represents and enacts materially this *doubleness of sense*. We believe that the logic of *Logic of Sense* is a plastic one, and that we should “plastify” Deleuze to further set its concepts in motion.

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<sup>70</sup> See Mike MICHAEL (ed.), *Accumulation: The Material Politics of Plastic*, Routledge, London 2020.

<sup>71</sup> See Gilles DELEUZE – Félix GUATTARI, *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2000.

<sup>72</sup> Jean BAUDRILLARD, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, Sage Publications, London 1998.

<sup>73</sup> See in particular Gay HAWKINS, *Plastic and Presentism: The Time of Disposability*, “Journal of Contemporary Archaeology”, 5, 1, 2018, pp. 91-102.

<sup>74</sup> We are referring to the case of microplastics (fragments of any type of plastic less than 5 mm). See for instance Lingzhi DENG *et al.*, *Public attitudes towards microplastics: Perceptions, behaviors and policy implications*, “Resources, Conservation & Recycling”, 163, 2020, pp. 1-11; Eva GARCIA-VAZQUEZ – Cristina GARCIA-AEL, *The invisible enemy. Public knowledge of microplastics is needed to face the current microplastics crisis*, “Sustainable Production and Consumption”, 28, 2021, pp. 1076-1089.

<sup>75</sup> See for instance Susan FREINKEL, *Plastic: A toxic love story*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston 2011.

While the crystal is linked to the “time-image”, plastic can be seen as an icon of the “movement-image”.<sup>76</sup> Even more broadly: without plastic, cinema could not have existed. Plastic is the very substratum of cinema, and cinema is a crucial issue for Deleuze. Plastic was the main material used for film stock, because it was flexible, transparent and durable. Celluloid was cut into thin strips, on which photographic images were imprinted. Then they were passed through a projector to display the images in sequence, creating the illusion of movement. Without this material, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to develop a practical system for recording and projecting films. As Miowdonik states: «polymers were used to produce celluloid and ushered in the biggest change in visual culture for a thousand years: the cinema».<sup>77</sup> Plastic, literally, have set movies in motion: «without plastics, all movies would never have existed; neither would the cinema matinee, nor the cinema itself, and our visual culture would be very different indeed».<sup>78</sup>

Ultimately, plastic is not only a material, but also a *gesture*<sup>79</sup> for philosophy. If through crystal we see the gush of life, through plastic we see how movement materializes. Plastic counter-effects crystal, and in turn crystal counter-effects plastic. Assembling plastic and crystal provides a more complete view not only of the Deleuzian philosophy, but also of how material individuation works according to him. Philosophy needs its materials for thinking, whether “natural” or “artificial” they may be. Perhaps, distinct but indiscernible, plastic and crystal form *one* talisman for the Deleuzian philosophy. According to him, indeed, philosophy is a paradox that pulls both directions at once.

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<sup>76</sup> Gilles DELEUZE, *Cinema 1. The Movement-Image*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986.

<sup>77</sup> Mark MIODOWNIK, *Stuff Matters: Exploring the Marvelous Materials That Shape Our Man-Made World*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston 2013, p. 3.

<sup>78</sup> *Ivi*, p. 153.

<sup>79</sup> On the importance of plastic gesture in philosophy we refer in particular to Catherine Malabou's work. See Catherine MALABOU, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*, Columbia University Press, New York 2009; ID., *The Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2012.

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